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Accidentally Vibrant

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Accidentally Vibrant

Small rays of sunshine

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This is the first issue of this universe's anthology collection.

Accidentally Vibrant

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An Anthologist Collection

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About This Universe

> *Vignettes of discovering joy, color, and life in a dull, boring world.*

The Foundation

> *The foundational anchor story for this universe.*

The Tomato in the Closet

Edwina Crumplebottom lived in a world where the highest compliment you could pay a meal was that it tasted like absolutely nothing. Her breakfast was a bowl of boiled grain—boiled, drained, boiled again, then drained a second time until every last molecule of flavor had been chased out like a trespasser. She ate it with a grey spoon, from a grey bowl, wearing a grey dress with a weave so subtle it could only be described as "slightly less grey than the other grey dress." She worked at the Premium Neutral Cracker factory, where her job was to stand beside a conveyor belt and make sure the crackers achieved the correct shade of not-tasting-anything. It was a good job. Stable. Sensory-free.

Nobody could say when the custom had started, only that it was as unquestioned as the grey of the sky. The taboo against joy, the reverence for blandness—they had simply always been, like gravity or the hum of fluorescent lights. No one remembered the beginning, and no one asked.

In the evenings, Edwina came home to her small apartment with its grey walls and grey curtains and grey sofa that sat exactly where a grey sofa should sit. She would prepare her dinner—a portion of steamed potato that had been steamed so long it gave up any pretense of being a potato and just became a warm, beige suggestion of sustenance. She would eat it without salt, because salt was considered intrusive. Then she would sit in the dark and feel the quiet hum of nothing happening, which was the closest thing to contentment the world allowed.

But Edwina had a secret.

In the back of her closet, behind a stack of grey sweaters, she kept a small pot of soil. And in that soil grew a tomato plant.

It had started as an accident, the way all vibrant things seemed to start in this world. A seed had stuck to her shoe after a walk—she never found out where, since the entire city was paved with grey gravel and lined with grey hedges that produced grey berries no one ate. She'd plucked it off, meaning to throw it away, but something made her shove it into a pot instead. Maybe it was the shape. Maybe it was the color—a warm, tawny brown, unlike anything she owned. She'd watered it out of curiosity, then out of habit, and then out of a quiet, shameful attachment she didn't have a word for.

Now the plant was two feet tall, with five glossy leaves and one single red tomato hanging from a stem like a tiny sun that had forgotten its place in the universe.

Edwina was not supposed to like the tomato. She knew this. The tomato was an offense. It was *sharp*. It was *bright*. It was everything her culture had spent generations refining away from. But every evening, after her bland dinner, she would open the closet door and look at it. And every time, something in her chest would do a little flip, like a fish jumping in a pond no one knew existed.

Tonight was different. Tonight the tomato was ripe. She could see it in the way the skin had gone from waxy to soft, in the way the red had deepened into something almost violent against the grey shadows of the closet. She reached out and touched it. It gave slightly under her finger. And then, without thinking, she picked it.

The stem snapped with a tiny *pop* that seemed deafening in the silence.

She brought the tomato to her kitchen. She did not blanch it. She did not boil it. She did not do any of the things a civilized person was supposed to do to render produce acceptable. Instead, she sliced it into quarters on a grey plate, and she put one quarter in her mouth.

The taste hit her like a slap from a friendly ghost.

It was sour and sweet and bright and *there*, filling her mouth with a presence so undeniable she had to sit down. Her eyes widened. Her lips, unpracticed, curved upward into something that felt almost painful—a smile, unused and creaking like a door that hadn't been opened in years. A laugh bubbled up from somewhere deep in her chest, a sound so foreign she barely recognized it as her own.

She laughed. Just once. Quietly.

And across the alley, Mr. Pumble was looking out his window.

Mr. Pumble was a man who took his blandness seriously. He wore a grey cardigan over a grey shirt over a grey undershirt, and he ate his lunches at a desk that was the exact same color as his sandwiches. When he saw Edwina's face twist into that horrible, involuntary expression of delight, he recoiled as if she had thrown acid at him. His hand went to his chest. His mouth opened and closed like a fish having a moral crisis. Then, with the grim determination of a man discharging his civic duty, he reached for his phone.

The Mental Health Social Workers arrived the next morning.

Edwina was at the sink, rinsing the grey plate that had held the tomato—she had eaten all four quarters, then the seeds, then the skin, and had licked her fingers clean in a fit of what she could only describe as joyful cannibalism—when the doorbell rang. She opened the door to find two people standing in the hallway, both dressed in grey suits of such flawless neutrality that they seemed to absorb the light around them.

“Good morning,” said the taller one, a man with a face so expressionless it might have been carved from bland cheese. “I am Mr. Nettle. This is Ms. Thorne. We received a report concerning your… episode.”

Ms. Thorne nodded, her grey eyes fixed on Edwina’s face with the gentle, clinical interest of someone examining a mildly interesting rash. “You were seen exhibiting uncontrolled joy at 7:43 PM yesterday. Can you confirm this?”

Edwina's heart hammered. The tomato seeds were still stuck between her teeth. She could taste them—sharp, peppery, alive. She bit the inside of her cheek, tasting the ghost of tomato, and forced her face into a mask of polite neutrality.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she said, her voice flat. "I was just… I was trying to sneeze."

Mr. Nettle's eyebrow twitched, a micro-movement that conveyed immense skepticism. "Sneezing does not typically involve upward curvature of the mouth."

Ms. Thorne pulled out a small grey tablet. "We have a standard protocol for these situations. It's non-invasive, mostly conversational. We just need to understand the root cause of the outburst so we can address it. With your cooperation, of course."

They were so polite. That was the worst part. They weren't angry or accusatory—they were concerned, in the way a doctor might be concerned about a patient who had started speaking in rhymes. The whole system ran on well-meaning alarm. Nobody thought joy was evil. They just thought it was a symptom.

Edwina let them in. She served them grey tea from grey cups. They asked her about her childhood, her work, her dreams—though they worded it as "whether she experienced any recurring thoughts of desire or anticipation." She told them she kept a tidy home, ate well (blanched vegetables, boiled grains), and had no unusual hobbies. Mr. Nettle nodded along, scribbling notes on his tablet. Ms. Thorne asked about the smile.

"It just happened," Edwina said. "I must have been thinking about a … a very effective cracker."

"Crackers don't typically elicit joy responses," Mr. Nettle said.

"This one was very neutral," Edwina insisted. "Perfectly neutral. It brought me a sense of deep, unexciting satisfaction."

Something flickered in Ms. Thorne's eyes—a brief, almost imperceptible relaxation. She seemed to accept this. "Satisfaction is

acceptable," she said. "Joy is the concern. There's a distinction. Satisfaction is within the normal range of emotional flatness."

They left her with a pamphlet: *Understanding Uncontrolled Joy: A Guide to Recovery*. It featured a grey cover with grey text. The first page read: "If you have experienced a spontaneous urge to laugh, smile, or otherwise express positive emotion, you may be suffering from Joy Flare Syndrome. This is not your fault. With proper treatment, you can return to a baseline of emotional neutrality." It included diagrams of a face with arrows pointing to "smile-prone zones" and instructions for keeping them relaxed, as if a smile were a muscle spasm you could train away.

Edwina closed the door. She stood in the grey hallway, holding the grey pamphlet, and she waited until she heard the footsteps of Mr. Nettle and Ms. Thorne fade into the distant hum of the elevator. Then she walked to her bedroom, opened the closet, and looked at the tomato plant.

It had five leaves, a stem, and a little nub where the fruit had been. She had eaten the evidence. But the plant remained. A green shoot, pushing up against the grey air.

Edwina smiled.

She did it in private, with no one watching. She smiled until her cheeks hurt, and then she reached out and touched the soil in the pot. It was dark and damp and smelled like earth—a sharp, alive smell that had no place in her apartment. She loved it.

Tomorrow she would buy more seeds. She knew a place—a forgotten corner of the market where a grey vendor sold grey produce, but where, if you looked carefully, a few brown seeds might cling to the bottom of a sack. She would plant them. She would water them. She would keep them hidden in the closet, behind the sweaters, and no one would ever know.

No one remembered when the rules had begun—they simply were, like the taste of ash or the weight of silence. But the tomato plant didn't care about memory. It only grew.

That was enough.

The Lint Whisperer

> *A master tailor specializing in the 'Shadow-on-Concrete' shade of grey is commissioned to create a wedding shroud that is too beautiful for public safety.*

The Lint Whisperer

The workshop smelled of boiled wool and stone dust. Elara Mohn preferred it that way. The air was a good grey—neutral, reliable, the kind that let a woman think without distraction.

Her fingers moved with the practiced economy of twenty years at the loom. The wedding shroud was coming together nicely. Shadow-on-Concrete, the bride had specified, and Elara had nodded with appropriate gravity. It was a demanding shade. Too dark and it veered toward the funereal, a social error of the first order. Too light and it flirted with Dove's Belly, a color so dangerously pale it was considered almost showy among certain tastemakers. Shadow-on-Concrete required a steady hand and a patient eye.

Elara had both.

The warp threads were a uniform charcoal, the weft a hair lighter. She worked the shuttle through, each pass a small act of perfecting the ordinary. Outside, the afternoon light was doing what afternoon light did—falling flat and unremarkable across the grey street, the grey buildings, the grey-coated pedestrians walking their grey walks to grey destinations.

It was a good day to make fabric.

The sun shifted. A crack in the clouds let through a beam of late light, angling through the high workshop window. It caught the

shroud at precisely the wrong angle.

Elara blinked.

The fabric shimmered.

Not loudly. Not in a way that shouted or demanded attention. It was a whisper of a shimmer, a ghost of iridescence that ran along the threads like water over river stones. For half a second, the grey seemed to hold something inside itself—a depth, a warmth, a secret pulse of light that was not quite grey at all.

Elara stopped weaving.

She stared.

The shimmer faded as the light moved on, and the shroud returned to its proper, respectable blandness. But she had seen it. She knew what she had done. Some accident of tension, some variation in the twist of the thread, had created a pattern that caught and held light in a way it should not.

It was beautiful.

The thought arrived unbidden, and with it came a warmth that spread through her chest like something dangerous. Her lips parted. A sound rose from somewhere deep in her throat, a forgotten melody her mother had once hummed while mending socks, back before her mother had learned better. Back before everyone learned better.

Elara heard herself humming and stopped as if struck.

Her hand flew to her mouth. The smile that had been gathering behind her teeth retreated, startled. She looked around the workshop as if someone might have witnessed the near-transgression, but she was alone. The walls were grey. The floor was grey. Even the dust motes drifting in the air were grey.

She was safe. This time.

But the shroud was not.

Her eyes returned to the fabric, and the full weight of what she had created settled onto her shoulders like a shroud itself. This was not a garment that could exist in the world. On the wedding day, when the bride walked down the aisle and the sun struck her from the right angle, the shroud would shimmer. Someone would see. Someone would react. Someone would smile, or gasp, or laugh with delight at the unexpected beauty.

And then the Mental Health Social Workers would come.

Elara had seen it happen once, years ago. A child, no more than six, had laughed at a butterfly in the park. The laugh was small, innocent, over in seconds. But the parents nearby had recoiled. Someone had reported it. The social workers arrived within the hour, smiling their professional smiles, carrying their clipboards and their gentle questions. The child had been taken for observation. The butterfly had been disposed of.

Elara had not smiled in public since.

She looked at the shroud. It was the finest work she had ever done. The shimmer was not a flaw—it was a miracle, a conversation between thread and light that she had stumbled into without meaning to. It was beautiful in a way the grey world had forgotten how to name.

And it would have to be destroyed.

Her hands trembled as she lifted the fabric from the loom. The light caught it again, and for one glorious, terrible moment, the shroud sang with color. Then Elara folded it carefully, pressing the shimmer deep into the folds where no light could find it.

She had one night before the wedding.

One night to make it safe.

The night gathered around the workshop like a held breath. Elara had lit no lamps—the grey dusk filtering through the window was light enough for what she needed to do. She had set out her

materials on the worktable with the precision of a surgeon preparing for an operation: a bowl of powdered coal dust, ground fine as flour; a soft cloth, worn to butter-softness by years of use; a small brush of badger hair, her finest tool.

The shroud lay folded on the cutting table, a dark patient awaiting treatment.

She picked it up. The fabric was cool and smooth in her hands, and even in the dim light she could feel where the shimmer lived—a warmth that was not quite temperature, a texture that was not quite touch. Her thumbs traced the invisible pattern she had woven by accident, and she closed her eyes.

She remembered the moment of creation. The shuttle had caught on a knot in the warp, and in correcting it, she had pulled the weft thread at a slightly different tension. Then again, three passes later, when a cough had made her hand jerk. The errors accumulated, each tiny deviation from perfection building on the last, until the whole section had developed a rhythm of its own—a secret architecture of light that no one had asked for and no one would thank her for.

She opened her eyes.

The coal dust waited in its bowl.

Elara dipped the badger brush into the powder, tapped it twice on the rim, and began.

The first stroke was the hardest. She touched the brush to the fabric where the shimmer was strongest, and the coal dust settled into the threads like ash on snow. The grey darkened, deepened, became ordinary. She watched the beauty die under her hand and felt something crack inside her chest.

She kept working.

Stroke by stroke, she killed it. The brush moved in small, patient circles, working the dust deep into the weave. She did not hurry. Hurrying would leave clumps, uneven patches, the kind of tell that

a sharp-eyed social worker might notice during a routine interview. It had to be perfect—not beautiful, but perfect. Perfectly grey. Perfectly bland. Perfectly safe.

Her hands knew the rhythm of destruction as well as they knew the rhythm of creation. Hour after hour, she rubbed and brushed and smoothed, and the shroud surrendered its secret glow with each passing stroke. The warmth faded. The depth flattened. The ghost of iridescence that had made her heart lift became just another grey thing in a grey world.

At some point, she began to weep.

It was not a dramatic weeping. There was no sobbing, no wailing, no carrying-on that might disturb the neighbors or attract attention. The tears simply arrived, sliding down her cheeks in silence, dripping onto the worktable where they made small dark spots on the grey wood. She did not wipe them away. She had no hands to spare for her own grief.

Her nose ran. She sniffled once, twice, and kept working.

The coal dust mixed with her tears on the fabric, turning into a thin grey mud that she smoothed into the weave with her fingertips. She could feel every thread now, each one a small death, a small surrender. She had made something that the world could not abide, and now she was unmaking it, thread by thread, and the world would never know.

That was the worst part. The not-knowing.

The bride would walk down the aisle in this shroud tomorrow, and everyone would nod approvingly at its proper shade, its respectable texture, its complete and total lack of anything remarkable. No one would gasp. No one would smile. No one would feel that sudden, dangerous lift of the heart that Elara had felt when the light first caught her work. The wedding would proceed in perfect grey harmony, and no one would ever know what they had missed.

Elara's hands kept moving.

She thought about the bride's face, which she had never seen. They had communicated through intermediaries—a note specifying the shade, another note confirming the measurements, a third note arranging the delivery. The bride was a name on a page, a number in a ledger, a shadow moving through the grey world like everyone else.

But tomorrow, that shadow would wear this shroud.

And the shadow would never know that she had almost worn light itself.

The thought made Elara's chest ache with a pain she had no name for. She pressed harder with the brush, grinding the coal dust deeper into the threads, as if she could grind away the memory of what she had made. But the memory would not leave. It lived behind her eyes, a small bright thing that refused to die.

Hours passed. The window lightened from black to charcoal to the first pale grey of dawn.

Elara sat back and looked at her work.

The shroud lay across the table, utterly transformed. It was grey. Just grey. Beautifully, perfectly, irreproachably grey. The kind of grey that would pass any inspection, withstand any scrutiny, survive any wedding. The kind of grey that would never cause a single person to smile.

She picked it up. The fabric was heavier now, weighted with dust. She held it to the growing light from the window and turned it slowly, searching for any trace of the shimmer, any remnant of that accidental miracle.

Nothing.

It was safe.

Elara folded the shroud with practiced hands, the same crisp folds she had used a thousand times before. She wrapped it in plain grey paper and tied it with plain grey string. She wrote the bride's address in plain grey ink.

Then she stood in the middle of her workshop, the package in her hands, and let herself feel the full weight of what she had done.

She was proud.

The pride was bitter and secret and shameful, but it was real. She had made something beautiful, and she had destroyed it, and no one would ever know. The beauty had existed—she knew it had, she had seen it, she had touched it, she had killed it with her own hands—and that knowledge would have to be enough.

She carried the package to the door.

The street outside was waking up. A grey-coated figure walked past, head down, eyes on the pavement. Another followed, then another. The morning was grey and ordinary and exactly as it should be.

Elara set the package by the door for the courier to collect.

She closed the door and leaned against it, alone in her workshop. The light from the window fell across her hands, and she looked at them—grey with coal dust, grey with work, grey with the evidence of her crime. She should wash them. She should clean the worktable. She should prepare for her next commission, another grey garment for another grey client who would never ask for anything more.

She did none of those things.

Instead, she sat down at the loom, still wearing her coal-dusted apron, still smelling of boiled wool and stone dust and tears. She placed her hands on the empty frame and closed her eyes.

She let herself remember.

The shimmer. The warmth. The moment when the light had caught her work and the grey had become something else entirely. It had lasted only seconds, but she had seen it, and she would carry it with her forever.

She opened her eyes.

Her fingers began to move, finding the warp threads, testing the tension. She did not know what she was making yet. She only knew that somewhere inside her, the memory of that stolen shimmer was still alive, and tomorrow—or the day after, or the day after that—it would find its way into her hands again.

She would make it safe.

But she would make it first.

The Connoisseur of Boiled Air

> *A prestigious food critic undergoes an existential crisis when he accidentally discovers a 'defect' in a batch of multiply-blanched millet: a lingering hint of sweetness.*

The grey of the dining room at Restaurant Perplexity was, Geralt Vane reflected, an exceptional grey. Not the dingy, apologetic grey of a bus station lavatory, nor the bureaucratic grey of a memo about pencil-sharpening protocols. No, this was a *philosophical* grey. The walls had been rendered in a shade called “Unremarkable Dawn,” which took three coats to achieve its particular flavor of utter non-existence. The tablecloths were “Forgotten Secretary.” The napkins, “Mild Regret.”

Geralt approved. This was a restaurant that understood its craft.

He sat across from Mudge Holt, who was already attacking his multiply-blanched millet with the grim enthusiasm of a man punishing a vegetable for having once been alive. Mudge chewed with his mouth slightly open, a habit Geralt found barbaric, but Mudge was the second-most respected texture critic in the city, so one tolerated certain... oral shortcomings.

“Serviceable,” Mudge grunted, pushing a grey kernel around his plate. “Good resistance. The third blanch was timed well. But there’s a *firmness* to the surface tension I find slightly aggressive. Almost ambitious.”

Geralt nodded, not listening. He was a connoisseur. He could detect the difference between a grain that had been boiled for four hours and one boiled for four hours and seven minutes. His palate was a finely calibrated instrument of negation. He tasted *nothing* better than anyone else in the city.

He lifted his fork. The millet sat on the plate like a small collection

of pebbles from a very sad river. Each grain had been boiled, drained, rinsed, boiled again, drained, rinsed, and boiled a third time until every molecule of flavor had been bullied into submission. The result was not food. It was *texture*—a meditation on the void.

Geralt took a bite.

The grains offered a pleasant, yielding resistance. A subtle pop followed by dissolution. The absence of taste was clean. Professional. He chewed twice, three times, and then—

His fork hit something different.

A small, round object. Distinct from the millet. Slightly firmer. His tongue, that veteran of a thousand flavorless meals, registered something it had not been trained to handle.

He pulled the object from his mouth and placed it on the edge of his plate.

A pea.

A *sugar-snapped* pea.

And it was *green*.

Not a robust green, not a defiant green, but a green nonetheless—a pale, almost apologetic green, like a bruise on a corpse that had once known sunlight. But unmistakable. Color. Flavor potential.

Geralt's heart performed a small, panicked somersault.

Mudge was still discoursing on the millet's "structural vowels" or some such nonsense. The waiter stood at attention by the wall, his grey tunic pressed into geometric submission. No one had noticed.

Geralt did something he had not done in seventeen years of professional reviewing.

He suppressed a smile.

It was a near thing. The corners of his mouth twitched like they were trying to escape his face. He coughed into his napkin, disguising the spasm as a clearing of phlegm, and composed his features into their usual expression of benign disapproval.

The pea sat on his plate. A defect. A failure of the kitchen's leaching process. A scandal.

He would write a scathing report. He would eviscerate Chef Sylvis Bream's reputation. He would describe—with the precise, withering vocabulary he had cultivated over decades—how this single, errant pea represented a catastrophic breakdown of culinary discipline. The review would be devastating. It would be *correct.*

But.

Geralt looked at the pea.

It was very small.

It was very green.

And somewhere, deep in the part of his brain he had spent his entire career ignoring, a voice whispered: *What if it tastes like something?*

Geralt excused himself with the practiced ease of a man who had spent decades pretending his bowels were more urgent than his thoughts. "The millet's structural integrity," he murmured to Mudge, "seems to be settling in my lower colon. A testament to its density."

Mudge grunted, not looking up from his plate. "Don't take too long. The second course will be a study in thermal uniformity—a boiled broth with the temperature variance of a professional waiting room."

The restroom was a triumph of aesthetic surrender. Grey tiles, grey grout, grey porcelain, a single grey bar of soap that smelled like the memory of a scent that had been asked to leave. The lighting was the precise color of a cloudy Tuesday afternoon in a city where the sun had given up.

Geralt locked the door. His hands were shaking.

He pulled the pea from his pocket. It sat in his palm like a tiny green accusation. He had wrapped it in a napkin, but the napkin was already stained with a faint chlorophyll residue—a color so vivid it looked like a wound.

He had never eaten anything with flavor. Not intentionally. In his youth, perhaps, before the norms had fully calcified, there had been rumors of taste—a stolen apple, a smuggled pepper—but those were the stories of madmen and outsiders. Geralt had built his reputation on the careful negation of sensation. He was a connoisseur of nothing. A master of absence.

The pea stared at him.

He could flush it. Claim he found a foreign object. Write the scathing review. Destroy Chef Bream. Return to the safe, grey world of texture-only criticism.

Instead, he put the pea in his mouth.

For a moment, nothing. The pea sat on his tongue like a tiny, smooth stone. Then, almost reluctantly, his teeth closed around it.

The first sensation was texture. A tight, taut skin giving way to a soft, mealy interior. His professional reflexes took over: moderate resistance, pleasing pop, minimal chew-residue. Four stars for mouthfeel.

Then came the taste.

It was not a flavor. It was a *detonation*. A sweetness so bright it felt like a physical force, like the universe had decided to apologize for every bland meal he had ever endured. The sugar hit his tongue, spread across his palate, and for a fraction of a second, Geralt Vane —the most respected texture critic in the city—experienced joy.

His eyes watered. His knees buckled. He grabbed the sink.

The pea dissolved. The sweetness lingered. And Geralt stood there, hunched over grey porcelain, breathing in ragged gasps, feeling the

color of it—the *greenness*—coursing through his veins like a miracle.

He stared at his reflection. His face was flushed. A thin sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead. And his mouth—his traitorous mouth—was curved into a smile. A real smile. The kind he had not worn since childhood, if he had ever worn it at all.

“No,” he whispered. “No, no, no.”

He wiped his face with a grey towel. He composed his features into a mask of neutral disapproval. He checked his collar, adjusted his cuffs, and spent a full minute breathing slowly, methodically, until his heart rate returned to its normal, flavorless rhythm.

When he emerged, Mudge was sipping water. “You look flushed,” Mudge said, narrowing his eyes. “Are you ill?”

“Gastric turbulence,” Geralt said smoothly. “The millet's resistance was, perhaps, too *ambitious* for my constitution.”

Mudge accepted this with a grunt. The waiter approached with the second course.

Geralt looked at his menu. He looked at the waiter. He looked at the grey broth, steam rising in a perfect, unflavored column.

“I will be writing my review tonight,” Geralt announced, his voice steady. “And I believe Chef Bream has achieved something remarkable with the millet's... structural daring. The grain-to-grain adhesion ratio is unprecedented. I shall recommend three stars.”

Mudge choked on his water. “Three stars? For a *millet* course? Geralt, your standards have eroded like a poorly blanched bean.”

“On the contrary,” Geralt said, lifting his spoon with a trembling hand. “I have simply developed an appreciation for... texture that exceeds the merely technical.” He paused, then added, with the faintest hint of a smile that no one noticed, “Perhaps I am finally learning to taste the absence more deeply.”

He did not look at the pea—now a memory on his tongue—nor did he think about the jar he would need to purchase. He simply took a

sip of the broth, which tasted like warm water that had once known a vegetable from a great distance, and found it entirely adequate.

Inadequate, even.

Wonderfully, gloriously inadequate.

Weeks later, Geralt Vane's apartment still smelled like a room that had given up on having opinions. Grey curtains, grey walls, grey carpet that matched the grey sky outside the window. The furniture was arranged with the geometric precision of a waiting room for a procedure nobody wanted. He had curated his entire life around the absence of intrusion. Flavor. Color. Emotion.

Under his bed, in a jar that had once held pickled beets (a scandalous product from a foreign country that no one discussed), sat twelve sugar-snapped peas.

He had purchased them from a black-market vendor who sold "defective" produce from the outskirts of the city—peas that had not been fully leached, carrots with a whisper of orange, a single tomato that had the audacity to be red. The vendor operated from a basement. His prices were astronomical. His clientele were desperate.

Geralt was now a member of that clientele.

He pulled the jar from under the bed. The glass was cool against his fingers. Twelve peas, pale green, sitting in a thin film of water. They looked like evidence.

He unscrewed the lid. The smell hit him first—a faint, grassy sweetness that made his stomach clench with something that was not hunger. It was anticipation. It was the feeling before a smile.

He took one pea out and placed it on his tongue.

The juice. The sugar. The brief, defiant burst of *aliveness* that flooded his mouth. He closed his eyes and let the flavor wash over him, and for three seconds he was not a critic. He was not a connoisseur of nothing. He was just a man whose tongue had finally learned what it was for.

He swallowed. Then he ate another. And another.

Three peas in, he stopped and looked at the jar. Nine left. He could ration them. One a week. Make them last until the next shipment from the basement vendor. He thought about the vendor's hands, grey with dust, trembling as they handed over the contraband vegetables. He thought about the chef at Restaurant Perplexity, who had received a three-star review and a career-saving recommendation, and who had no idea that his defect had become a man's secret religion.

Geralt sat on the edge of his bed, the jar in his lap. The city hummed outside, grey and orderly and flavorless. He had spent thirty years becoming the most respected palate in a world that had outlawed taste. He had written seventeen books on the art of detecting the undetectable. He had judged competitions where the winner was the chef who removed flavor most completely.

And all of it, every word, every judgment, every star rating, was a lie he had told himself to survive.

The pea on his tongue was true.

He ate another. And another. By the fifth pea, he was crying. Not loudly—just a few tears that ran down his cheeks and dripped onto the grey carpet. He wiped them with the back of his hand and smiled, alone in the dark, and felt the joy curl through him like a child who had found a hiding spot.

He would keep the jar. He would buy more. He would write glowing reviews for chefs who made mistakes. He would protect the defects. He would become a guardian of the accidental sweetness in a world that had declared war on pleasure.

And when he died, they would find the jar under his bed, and they would not understand. They would write obituaries about a great critic, a master of texture, a man who had tasted nothing and made a career of it.

But he would know.

He popped the last pea into his mouth, chewed slowly, and swallowed the evidence. Then he closed the jar, slid it back under the bed, and lay down on the grey sheets.

Tomorrow, he would review a restaurant that served boiled water with a side of strained air. He would give it four stars for “the bravery of its commitment to emptiness.”

Tonight, he tasted sweetness, and it tasted like rebellion.

The Humidity of a Hum

> *An elderly laundry-presser discovers that the rhythmic vibration of her throat creates a sound that feels like a warm blanket, leading her to experiment with melody in an echoey basement.*

The basement exhaled. Great lungs of steam between the pipes, the hiss and settle of water in the walls, the wet wool smell of a thousand grey tunics waiting their turn. Pumphrey Gristle-Sigh stood at the press, her hands moving in the rhythm they'd learned forty years ago: lift, lay flat, pull the lever, listen to the sigh of moisture leaving fabric. Lift, lay flat, pull the lever. The steam rose around her face like a polite ghost.

She was thinking about nothing. That was the gift of this work—the way it emptied the skull until only the body remained, a machine among machines. Her throat was dry from the heat. She swallowed, and the swallow caught on something, and the something became a sound.

It was not a word. It was not a cough. It was a low, accidental *hum* that rose from somewhere behind her sternum and buzzed against her closed lips.

The pipes answered.

The vibration traveled up through the floor, into the press, into her palms, and then—impossibly—into her chest, where it settled like something alive. Warm. Round. A velvet moth with dusty wings, fluttering once, then folding itself against her ribs.

Pumphrey's hands stopped on the tunic. The steam curled. The sound faded.

She looked left. Then right. The other pressers were hunched over their stations like grey mushrooms in a damp forest, their faces

blank with the particular concentration of people who have long ago stopped thinking about their work. No one had looked up. No one had heard.

Her heart was doing something strange. Not racing. Not pounding. Just… aware.

She pulled the lever. The press came down. The steam hissed. She lifted the tunic—flat, dry, grey—and hung it on the rack. Then she picked up another. Same weight. Same weave. Same nothing.

But her throat remembered.

She let the hum happen again, smaller this time, a thread of sound barely thicker than her breath. The pipes didn't answer the same way—too soft, too shy—but she felt it anyway, that velvet moth stirring, stretching one wing against the cage of her chest.

Pumphrey stopped. She pressed her lips together until they were a thin grey line.

Around her, the basement breathed. The steam rose. The tunics hung in neat rows, identical and patient and utterly without malice. No one had noticed. No one would notice.

But *she* had noticed.

She picked up the next tunic. The moth settled deeper into her chest, patient now, waiting.

The first day back, the basement offered no secrets. Pumphrey stood at her press and opened her throat, and the sound that came out was thin as fishbone, a scraping little nothing that the pipes swallowed without reply. She tried again. Nothing. The moth in her chest stirred but wouldn't rise. Her body had forgotten the shape of the vibration.

She forced herself not to think about it.

The tunics came and went. The steam hissed. The hours passed like wet cloth through a wringer.

On the third day, she stopped trying. Her hands found their rhythm—lift, lay flat, pull—and her mind emptied into the heat and the weight of the press. She was just a machine among machines, her thoughts grey as the fabric, grey as the walls, grey as everything above and below the earth.

And then the hum slipped out.

It came from nowhere, or from the part of her that had been doing this work for forty years, the part that knew the exact pressure required to make moisture leave wool. It was low. Lower than she thought she could go. A sound like a door closing in a deep house.

The pipes answered.

The vibration entered through her feet first, then her palms on the press, then her chest, where it bloomed into something solid and warm. A blanket. That was the only word for it. A blanket pulled tight around a sleeping child. A blanket folded over a cage, quieting the bird.

She held the note. The moth in her chest stopped its frantic stirring and just breathed.

The footstep came from the stairs.

Pumphrey's hum collapsed into her throat. She felt it trying to escape, pressing against her teeth, and she caught it with a cough—dry, wracking, theatrical. She bent over the press, her hand over her mouth, her eyes watering from the effort of not humming.

"It sounds like a vapor-lock."

Drizzle Mothwood stood at the bottom of the stairs, her face pinched and white as a peeled almond. She was holding a basket of tunics that needed pressing, but her eyes were fixed on Pumphrey's back.

"Vapors," Pumphrey wheezed. She coughed again, harder this time, letting it rasp through her throat until the urge to hum was buried under the performance of illness.

Drizzle's eyes narrowed. "You should see a social worker. That could be a pulmonary wobble. They have treatments."

Pumphrey nodded, still coughing, and waved her hand in a way that meant *it's nothing, it's fine, leave me alone*. Drizzle watched her for a long moment, then set down the basket and walked to her station on the other side of the basement.

The rest of the day, Pumphrey did not hum.

But the next day, she returned.

She had learned something. The hum was not a thing she could demand from her body. It was a thing her body gave her when she stopped demanding. She worked. She pressed. She let the heat and the steam and the monotony fill her up until she was empty of everything except the rhythm.

And then, when the pipes were at their loudest and the steam was at its thickest, she let the hum come.

It was the same low note. The same vibration. The same warm blanket, settling around her ribs.

She held it for five seconds. Ten. Fifteen. The moth stretched its wings and purred.

No one came down the stairs.

She stopped the hum and picked up the next tunic.

Over the following days, she developed a liturgy. A secret geography of sound. She learned which corners of the basement held her voice and which ones swallowed it. She learned that the pipes behind the old boiler resonated better than the ones near the stairs. She learned that the hum was safest in the late afternoon, when the other pressers were too tired to listen.

She hummed only when the steam was thick enough to wrap around her. She hummed only when her hands were moving. She hummed so quietly it was barely a shiver on her lips.

The moth in her chest grew calmer. It stopped battering itself against her ribs. It just settled, warm and heavy, breathing with her.

By the end of the week, she had a rhythm. Not just the press rhythm, not just the steam rhythm, but *her* rhythm. A secret pulse running beneath the grey surface of her days.

She stood at her press, grey as the steam, grey as the walls, grey as everything above and below the earth.

And she hummed.

The steam rose. The pipes answered. The warmth spread from her chest to her fingers to the soles of her feet.

No one heard.

No one would hear.

The blanket settled around her, and she pressed the next tunic, and the world went on exactly as it had before.

The Monday came like all Mondays came—grey and damp and full of tunics.

Pumphrey Gristle-Sigh stood at her press and watched the other workers shuffle in, their faces set in the particular expression of people who have spent the weekend forgetting they would have to return. Drizzle Mothwood passed with a nod that held no suspicion, her eyes already glazing over into the thousand-yard stare of a woman who would press tunics until she became one.

Pumphrey's hand went to her chest. The moth was there, waiting.

She had spent the weekend thinking. Not about the hum itself—that part was simple, a body memory she could summon with a thought—but about what came next. The social workers. The treatments. The gentle, probing questions about what she had felt and whether she understood that such sensations were a sign of something *off*, something that required correction.

She had seen it happen to others. A woman at the market who laughed at a dropped jar. A child on a bus who giggled at a cloud shaped like a hand. They had been taken aside, spoken to in soft voices, returned weeks later with faces smoother and emptier than before.

Cured.

Report it, the whispering part of her said. They'll fix you. You'll be normal again.

But she had been normal for sixty-three years. She knew exactly what normal felt like. It felt like wet wool. It felt like grey walls and grey food and grey clothes and a grey space inside her chest where something had been sleeping.

The moth was not sleeping anymore.

She pulled the lever. The press came down. The steam rose.

And she made a decision so quiet that even she almost missed it: she would not report it. She would not seek a cure. She would carry this thing—this velvet, vibrating, impossible warmth—into the grey world and keep it hidden.

Not out of defiance. Not out of rebellion. She was too old and too tired for either of those words.

Out of *possession*. This was hers. The first thing in decades that belonged only to her.

The days settled into a new rhythm.

She worked. She pressed. She did not hum during the morning shift, when the basement was full and the other pressers were sharp-eyed with caffeine. She did not hum during the break, when Drizzle Mothwood sat two benches away and chewed her bland biscuit with the concentration of someone testing a hypothesis.

She hummed in the late afternoon, when the steam was thickest and the light through the high windows had turned the colour of old

dishwater. She hummed when the rhythm of the press had emptied her mind and her body was just a machine, because that was when the hum came easiest—when she wasn't trying.

She learned new notes.

Not many. Just two. A low one that resonated with the pipes behind the boiler, and a slightly higher one that vibrated in her teeth and made the moth flutter in a different way, a happier way. She did not have words for the difference. She just knew that one felt like *settling* and the other felt like *lifting*.

She never hummed both together. She was not greedy.

On the twelfth day, Drizzle found her again.

Pumphrey was in the corner by the boiler, her hands on a tunic, her throat open to the low note that made the pipes sing. The vibration had spread from her chest to her arms to her fingertips, and she had closed her eyes—just for a moment—to feel it more completely.

When she opened them, Drizzle was standing at the top of the stairs.

Not moving. Not speaking. Just watching.

Pumphrey's throat closed. The hum died. The pipes went silent.

They looked at each other across the basement. Pumphrey's heart was doing that strange thing again—not racing, not pounding, just *aware*—and she knew that her face had done something it was not supposed to do. A softening. A relaxation. A lifting of the corners of her mouth.

Not a smile. Barely a twitch.

But Drizzle's eyes widened.

"You were—" Drizzle started, then stopped. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish in shallow water. "Your face."

Pumphrey coughed. She had become very good at coughing. "Vapors," she said. "They're affecting my vision. I was squinting."

Drizzle stared at her. The silence stretched between them like wet cloth, heavy and dripping.

Then Drizzle's face did something strange. It tightened. Not in suspicion—in *recognition*. The same way a person looks at a crack in a wall and realizes it was always there, they just hadn't noticed it before.

"It sounded nice," Drizzle said.

The words hung in the air, wrong and impossible and terrifying.

Pumphrey's hands gripped the tunic. "What?"

"The sound." Drizzle's voice was barely a whisper. "Before you stopped. It sounded…" She searched for the word like a woman looking for a lost coin in a dark room. "Warm."

The basement held its breath. The pipes ticked as they cooled. The steam curled around them, thick as wool.

Pumphrey looked at Drizzle—at the pinched, pale face, the grey uniform, the hands that had been pressing tunics for just as long as her own—and saw something she had never seen before.

A crack.

A hairline fracture in the grey surface of the world.

Drizzle looked terrified. Her eyes were wide, her lips pressed together, her shoulders hunched like she expected the ceiling to fall. She had said something scandalous. Something dangerous. Something that could get her reported.

But she had said it.

Pumphrey opened her mouth. The words *it's nothing, it's a sickness, I'm getting help* sat on her tongue, ready and practised and safe.

She did not say them.

"It is warm," she said instead.

Drizzle's face went through a series of contortions—shock, confusion, something that might have been recognition—and then she turned and walked back up the stairs, her footsteps quick and uneven on the concrete.

She did not report Pumphrey.

She did not speak to her again that day.

But the next morning, when Drizzle passed Pumphrey's station, there was a small, grey pebble on top of Pumphrey's tunic basket. Round. Smooth. Warm from being held.

Pumphrey slipped it into her pocket.

That evening, after the last tunic had been pressed and hung, after the other workers had filed out into the grey twilight, Pumphrey stayed behind.

She stood at her press. The basement was empty. The pipes were cooling. The steam had dissipated into a faint mist that clung to the walls like sweat.

She placed both hands on the press. She closed her eyes.

She hummed.

The low note came first, the one that resonated with the boiler pipes, the one that felt like a warm blanket settling around her ribs. The moth in her chest stretched its wings and breathed.

Then the higher note, the one that vibrated in her teeth, the one that felt like *lifting*. She held it for a long, quiet moment, feeling it travel through her bones, through her skin, through the press, through the floor, through the walls.

The pipes answered. The vibration came back to her, amplified,

transformed, warmer than before.

She opened her eyes.

The steam had risen around her, thick and white, curling in the dim light. It wrapped around her shoulders like a shawl. It rose from the press in lazy spirals, catching the last of the grey light from the high windows.

She stood in the middle of it, grey as everything, grey as always.

But inside her chest, the moth was purring.

She pressed the last tunic. She hung it on the rack. She turned off the press. She walked up the stairs and out into the street, where the streetlamps were beginning to glow with their soft, grey light.

The pebble was warm in her pocket.

She did not hum on the way home. The streets were too public, the neighbours too close, the walls too thin. But she carried the vibration with her, stored behind her ribs, wrapped in the warm blanket of her secret.

It was hers.

No one had taken it.

No one would take it.

And tomorrow, when she stood at the press and the steam rose around her, she would hum again. A low note. A higher note. Maybe—if she was brave—two notes together.

The moth stretched its wings, settled deeper into her chest, and waited.

The world went on, grey and damp and full of tunics.

But Pumphrey Gristle-Sigh had a velvet moth in her ribs and a warm pebble in her pocket, and that was enough.

That was more than enough.

A Smudge of Sunset in the Dust-Bin

> *Oonth, a young boy who finds the world's quiet grey frequency too loud, discovers an abandoned orange kitten that vibrates with a color so offensive he thinks it's a tiny, furry heart-attack.*

The street hummed at exactly 497 hertz—Oonth was certain of it, because that was the frequency that made his back teeth itch and his ears feel like they were being slowly filled with warm, damp wool. Every day the same hum. Every day the same grey, the same gravel-sacks slumped against the same corrugated fences like dead, overfed slugs. The sky was a lid. The air was a hand pressed gently against his mouth.

He was walking home from school, which was a building that smelled of boiled turnip and regret, and he was trying very hard not to see anything. Seeing things made the hum louder. His mother had explained this to him once, with the gentle patience of someone explaining that the moon was actually a very large, very flat button. *You just have to let the world be quiet, Oonth. Let it be grey. That's what quiet is.*

Oonth thought quiet was perhaps the loudest thing he had ever encountered.

He stopped walking because his left shoe had come untied—the lace was a thin, dignified grey string that had been tied and retied so many times it had given up on being a lace and was now just a memory of a knot. He crouched down, and that was when he saw it.

Behind the gravel-sacks. A smudge.

No. Not a smudge. A *violence*.

It was orange. Not the grey-orange of a tired sunset remembered through a dirty window. Not the brownish-orange of a biscuit that had been left in the warming drawer for three weeks. It was *orange* orange. The color of a thing that had never been introduced to the concept of restraint. It was a small, furry explosion, and it was vibrating.

Oonth's heart stopped. Then started again at a frequency that clashed horribly with the street's hum.

The kitten was perhaps the size of his mother's hand, though his mother's hand was a pale, unremarkable grey and this was—there was no other word for it—*rude*. It had eyes the color of old traffic lights that had forgotten what they were supposed to be regulating. Its fur was a shocking, flamboyant affront, as if someone had taken the concept of "sunset" and boiled it down until only the most offensive particles remained.

It was purring.

The purr was a problem. It was not the polite, apologetic hum of an appliance that knew it was intruding. It was a low, thrumming *unauthorized* sound that seemed to bypass Oonth's ears entirely and lodge itself directly in his chest, behind his ribs, where it bounced around like a moth in a jar. It felt like a secret that wanted to be screamed.

Oonth looked around. The street was empty, which was typical—nobody lingered on streets, because lingering suggested you had found something worth lingering for. But a window curtain twitched three houses down. Twitched and stilled. Someone was watching.

He had approximately forty-five seconds before they came to investigate the source of his frozen crouch, and then they would see it, and then they would *report*, and then the social workers would come with their grey coats and their gentle, probing questions about his emotional hygiene. They would take the kitten away. They would probably take him away too, to a room with beige walls and a box of bland crackers and a lot of careful nodding.

He could not let that happen.

The kitten looked up at him with its obscene orange eyes and mewed. It was a small sound. A sound that had never been taught to apologize.

Oonth made a decision. It was not a good decision. It was the kind of decision that makes your whole life pivot on a single point and never quite align again. But his chest was full of that hum, and the street was full of its own hum, and he was tired of being a well-tuned instrument for a song he had never agreed to play.

He took off his sweater.

It was a fine sweater. Perfectly grey. Perfectly bland. Knitted by his aunt Gribble, who had won three consecutive awards for "Most Neutral Garment" at the annual Sartorial Uniformity Gala. He wrapped it around the kitten with the careful precision of a bomb disposal technician handling a device that might also be a small, warm, purring sun.

The orange *dimmed*. Not vanished—the sweater was only grey, not a portal to a colorless dimension—but it became a suggestion of orange, a rumor of orange, the kind of orange you could plausibly deny if challenged.

Oonth stood up, cradling the bundle close to his chest. The kitten's purr traveled through his ribs and into his skull, where it set up a small, permanent residence. He could feel it adjusting the furniture.

The curtain twitched again. A face appeared, pale and curious as a fish in a murky tank.

Oonth walked. He did not run, because running would attract attention, and attention was the thing that got you reported. He walked at the precise speed of a boy who had just remembered a very important thing he needed to do at home, a thing that was perfectly ordinary and required no explanation.

Behind him, the curtain fell still.

He took three lefts, a right, and a shortcut through an alley that

smelled like damp stone and the ghosts of boiled vegetables. The kitten squirmed once, twice, then settled against his chest with the boneless confidence of a creature that had never had to worry about being found.

"Don't," Oonth whispered, his voice barely a vibration. "Don't make any sound."

The kitten, naturally, purred harder.

His house was grey. All the houses were grey, but his was a particular shade of twilight-slate with a door the color of wet concrete after it had been rained on and then forgotten. He fumbled for his key, which was also grey, because originality had been bred out of the metal.

Inside, his mother was in the kitchen, performing the daily ritual of triple-blanching the evening's root vegetables. The water hissed, the steam rose, the smell of nothing filled the air with authoritative absence.

"Oonth?" she called, her voice a pleasant, flat line. "Did you have a quiet day?"

"Yes," he said, and the word tasted like a lie wrapped in the skin of a truth. "Very quiet. I'm going to my room."

"Good. There's a new beige fungus for dinner. Very subtle."

He climbed the stairs, which creaked in the same key as everything else, and shut the door to his bedroom. The room was sound-proofed—his mother had insisted, after the incident with the harmonica, which Oonth still maintained was a legitimate musical instrument and not a cry for help.

He set the bundle on his bed. The sweater shifted. The kitten's head emerged, looking rumpled and offended, and let out a mew that was calibrated to exactly the pitch of Oonth's sternum.

He stared at it.

The kitten stared back.

Outside, the street hummed at 497 hertz, and the grey light pressed against the window like a patient, waiting face. Inside, there was a small, unauthorized sun, purring in a pile of defeated knitwear.

Oonth's chest was full of a new frequency.

He had no idea what to do with it. But he knew, with the certainty of a boy who had just smuggled a felony past his own mother, that he was not going to give it back.

The bedroom was a box of grey. Grey walls, grey curtains, grey bedspread that had been chosen specifically because it absorbed sound rather than reflecting it. The carpet was a shade called "Subdued Slate" and the light from the single window came through a filter of dust and resignation, landing on everything like a sigh made visible.

Oonth had spent many afternoons in this room, practicing the art of being still. It was a skill, like whistling or pretending to enjoy boiled parsnip. You had to empty yourself out, let the grey seep in through your pores until you were just another neutral object in a neutral world. A boy-shaped hole in the fabric of nothing.

But the kitten was making that impossible.

It had emerged fully from the sweater now, and was engaged in a thorough investigation of Oonth's pillow. It sniffed. It pawed. It turned in a small, furious circle and then collapsed into a puddle of orange fur that seemed to glow against the grey fabric like a wound that refused to heal.

The purring had not stopped. It had, in fact, intensified. It was now a continuous low thrum that filled the room with a frequency that felt less like sound and more like *disagreement*. The air molecules themselves seemed offended.

Oonth sat on the edge of his bed, hands pressed flat against his knees, watching.

"This is bad," he said quietly. "This is very bad. You understand that, right? You're a disaster. You're a small, furry disaster with a—" He

gestured vaguely at the kitten's entire existence. "—a *personality*."

The kitten yawned. Its mouth was pink. Pink was a color that had no business existing in this room. Pink was a color that should have been banned by international treaty.

Oonth's heart was doing something strange. It was beating faster, which was normal for a boy who had just committed a crime against social decorum, but it was also beating *differently*. There was a skip in it now, a syncopation that didn't match the flat, steady rhythm he had cultivated since childhood. It was as if his chest had become a badly-tuned radio, picking up two stations at once.

One station was grey. It played the hum of the street, the sound of his mother's voice, the soft static of a life lived between acceptable boundaries.

The other station was orange. It played the kitten.

He reached out a hand, slowly, as if approaching a creature that might bite him or, worse, demand something from him he didn't know how to give. His fingers hovered over the orange fur. The fur looked warm. It looked like it might stain his skin, leave a mark that would never quite wash off.

He touched it.

The kitten's fur was impossibly soft. Softer than anything Oonth had ever felt. Softer than the grey sweaters, softer than the boiled vegetables, softer than the careful, padded words his mother used when she was explaining why certain things were not done. It was the softness of something that had never been told to be quiet.

And it was *warm*.

The warmth traveled up Oonth's fingers, into his wrist, up his arm, and settled in his chest where it met the new, orange rhythm and said: *Yes. This one.*

He pulled his hand back as if burned.

"What are you?" he whispered.

The kitten rolled onto its back, exposing a belly that was a shade of orange so bright it made Oonth's eyes water. It mewed again, that same impossible pitch, and Oonth felt something crack open inside him. A small crack. The kind that lets light in.

He looked around the room. The grey walls seemed flatter now, less like protection and more like a cage. The grey bedspread was just fabric. The grey light was just light. None of it had any power except the power he gave it.

Outside, he could hear his mother moving around in the kitchen. The soft clink of grey pots. The whisper of water draining from yet another set of blanched vegetables. The world was proceeding as it always did, humming its flat, grey hum, expecting everyone to hum along.

But Oonth's chest was no longer humming. It was purring.

He reached out again, this time with both hands, and scooped the kitten up. It fit perfectly in his palms, a warm, squirming weight that smelled like dust and sunshine and something else—something that didn't have a name in his language, because his language had no words for things that were allowed to be bright.

"I'm going to hide you," he said, and his voice shook. "I'm going to hide you in the sweaters. You have to be quiet. You have to be—" He stopped. The kitten was licking his thumb. Its tongue was rough and small and felt like a question he didn't know how to answer.

The hollowed-out pile of grey sweaters was in the corner of his closet, behind a stack of other grey sweaters. He had created it months ago, without knowing why. A small, secret cavity in the uniform mass of his wardrobe, lined with the softest of the jumpers. It had felt like a waste of space at the time. A pointless exercise in rearranging nothing.

Now he knew. The cavity had been waiting.

He placed the kitten inside. The orange fur disappeared into the grey wool, becoming a muffled warmth, a contained secret. The purring was quieter now, softened by layers of neutral fiber, but it

was still there. A tremor beneath the surface of the quiet.

Oonth sat back on his heels, staring at the pile of sweaters. From the outside, it looked like nothing. A heap of unremarkable clothing, exactly like every other heap of unremarkable clothing in every other grey household.

But inside, there was a sun.

He pressed his hand against his chest. The new rhythm was still there, beating in counterpoint to the old one. Two songs playing at once. Two frequencies, orange and grey, entwined but separate.

For a long moment, he was terrified. The terror was familiar—the same cold edge he felt when he accidentally met someone's eyes, when his mother asked him if he was happy, when the social workers came to school for their annual lecture about emotional hygiene. The terror of being *seen*, of being *known*, of being something other than what the world expected.

But beneath the terror, there was something else. Something that felt like breathing after holding your breath too long. Something that felt like the first note of a song you didn't know you remembered.

The kitten purred. The grey sweaters muffled it. But Oonth could still hear it, feel it, carry it in his chest like a second heartbeat.

He sat down on the floor of his closet, back against the wall, knees drawn up, and closed his eyes. The grey pressed in from all sides. The street hummed its endless hum. His mother called up the stairs that dinner would be ready in twenty minutes, and the beige fungus was particularly well-executed this evening.

Oonth didn't answer.

He was listening to the orange beat inside him, learning its shape, letting it settle into the spaces where the grey had worn grooves. It didn't fit. It scraped and bumped and refused to smooth itself down. It was a terrible, beautiful, unauthorized noise.

And he was going to keep it.

He opened his eyes. The closet was dark and grey and safe. But in the pile of sweaters, a single thread of orange fur had caught the dim light, glowing like a crack in a dam, like the first line of a story no one had told yet.

Oonth reached out and touched it.

The world hummed on without him. And for the first time in his life, Oonth was glad to be out of tune.

The Gospel of the Grey Pebble

> *A meditative overview of the world's functional absurdity, narrated through the lens of an instructional manual for new parents on how to properly dampen a child's natural 'vibrancy' without causing a scene.*

The Gospel of the Grey Pebble

Before the sun has the indecency to announce itself, you will wake to the sound of nothing. This is correct. The bedroom will be the color of a dead moth's wing, which is to say, tasteful. Your child, still a soft, unshaped lump of potential impropriety, will be stirring in its crib. Do not mistake this for joy. It is merely the body's crude machinery warming up.

Your first duty is the paste.

Remove the grains from the regulation canister with a wooden spoon. Do not use metal—the clang is too bright. Place them in the designated pot, which has been scoured to a matte finish. Now, blanch them. Then blanch them again. Drain the water. Blanch a third time, allowing the last dregs of flavor to leach out like a confession under duress. A fourth blanching is not excessive; it is *thorough*. The final product should resemble congealed rain. If you taste a hint of anything—a ghost of earth, a memory of sun—you have failed. Scrape the batch and begin again.

Serve the paste in the regulation grey bowl. The spoon must be ceramic, preferably chipped, to avoid any reflective surface that might catch the light and inspire thoughts of beauty.

Now, the child.

Do not pick it up with enthusiasm. Approach with the same energy you would use to retrieve a damp sock. The child will likely begin to make a sound. It is a small, rising hum, like a kettle deciding whether to whistle. This, the manual calls the *morning hum*. It is not hunger. It is not distress. It is the soul's undignified attempt to greet the day with something approaching warmth. This cannot be permitted.

Do not shush. Shushing is an acknowledgment. Instead, place your palm firmly but gently over the child's mouth. Maintain eye contact. Your face must be as immobile as a wet slab of slate. The hum will taper into confusion, then silence. Good. You have just saved your child from a lifetime of mental health interventions.

Let us be clear: the child is not unhappy. It is merely learning the proper relationship between interior experience and exterior presentation. The joy is still there, somewhere, diffused and harmless, like a drop of ink in a bucket of greywash. That is where it belongs.

Dress the child in the assigned romper—shade 4B, "Curbstone." Fasten the buttons with the disinterest of a bureaucrat stamping forms. Do not linger. Do not coo. Do not, under any circumstances, smile.

The morning is now prepared. You have achieved nothing notable, which is the whole point. The world outside your door is a carefully maintained vacuum, and you have done your small part to keep it empty.

Now, you are ready for the commute.

As you board the transport—shade 7C, "Burial Moth," with seats upholstered in a fabric that feels like licking a dry battery—you take your position. Your child is secured in the regulation carrier, facing inward to avoid external stimuli. The bus jerks forward with the enthusiasm of a man being asked to describe his feelings.

You notice, immediately, the man across the aisle. He is a perfectly unremarkable specimen: grey coat, grey trousers, grey soul. His face

is arranged in the standard expression—a sort of polite constipation of the spirit. Good. But then, something shifts.

The sun has made a mistake.

Through the grimy window, a shaft of light cuts across the cabin. It is pale, weak, the sort of light that has been through so many filters it should know better. But it catches the dust motes, turning them into something that, in a less disciplined world, might be called beautiful. The man across the aisle blinks. His lips part. A flicker passes across his features—a softening, a loosening, a small, horrifying *warming*.

You have seen this before. It is what the manual calls the *glowing sensation*. A brief, involuntary response to stimuli that the brain incorrectly interprets as pleasurable. The man's eyes widen. His chest rises. He is about to do something unspeakable.

He is about to *glimmer*.

But the crowd has already noticed. No one turns to look—that would be acknowledgment. Instead, a subtle shift occurs. The woman beside him adjusts her posture, leaning away by a millimeter. The man in the seat ahead stiffens, his neck tightening as if bracing for a blow. A low, collective hum of disapproval—not voiced, but felt, like the pressure drop before a storm.

One passenger, a grandmotherly figure with a face like a closed umbrella, allows herself a single, delicate *tsk*. It is barely audible. It is devastating.

The glowing man feels it. His eyes dart nervously around the cabin. He sees no one looking, but he sees everyone *not* looking in a way that screams of judgment. The warmth in his chest curdles into shame. His lips press together. His shoulders slump. He withdraws into himself like a snail tasting salt.

The moment passes.

The sun retreats behind a cloud. The cabin returns to its proper grey dimness. The woman beside him relaxes. The grandmother folds her

hands. The man across the aisle stares at his shoes with the gratitude of a sinner who has been saved from a very awkward public spectacle.

This is the genius of our system. No laws. No enforcers. Just the quiet, silent machinery of social disgust, calibrated to the finest tolerance. The glowing sensation is not punished—it is *corrected*, gently, politely, with the same firm but loving hand you used to cover your child's mouth this morning.

Consider the alternative. What if that man had smiled? A single, genuine smile in a public space. Within minutes, a team of mental health social workers would be dispatched. They would arrive with their clipboards and their gentle, probing questions. They would categorize his joy, quantify it, treat it. He would spend weeks in a state-mandated rehabilitation program, learning to recognize the *triggers* of his inappropriate affect and replace them with a more sustainable emotional baseline—i.e., nothing.

The crowd's reaction saved him from all that. They are not his enemies. They are his guardians, their collective revulsion a vaccine against the disease of brightness.

You feel something, then. In your own chest. A faint, traitorous flicker. The memory of a sunrise you once saw, before you learned better. But you have been trained. You place your palm flat against your sternum and press down, physically depressing the sensation. It dissolves into a dull ache, which is acceptable.

Your child stirs. You feel its small body tense, as if it, too, caught the light. But you have already turned it away from the window. Its face is pressed against your coat—shade 3E, "Silt." It smells of nothing. Good.

The bus continues. The world remains beautifully, blessedly boring.

Arriving home is the day's final test.

The transport deposits you and your child at the designated stop, beneath a sky the color of a washed-out receipt. You walk the

regulation route—shade 9A, “Pavement’s Regret”—with your gaze fixed at a point three feet ahead. Do not look up. The clouds occasionally arrange themselves into shapes that resemble things: a bird, a hand, a spoon. This is not meaning. It is coincidence, and it is trying to trick you.

Your child is quiet. This is good. But you have learned to distrust silence. Silence can be a symptom of deep absorption, and deep absorption often precedes a *spark*. The child’s eyes are wide, fixed on a crack in the pavement where a single blade of grass has committed the social error of being green. It is not a vibrant green—more of a sickly grey-green, like a bruise on a mushroom. But it is, technically, a color that is not grey.

You do not react. That would acknowledge the breach.

Instead, you shift the carrier so the child’s vision is redirected toward the wall of the building beside you—shade 5D, “Forgotten Invoice.” The crack is forgotten. The child blinks. The moment passes.

Inside, you prepare the evening meal. This is a solemn ritual. The paste has been pre-portioned, but you must still blanch it twice to remove any residual memories of the sun. You steam a vegetable—something from the brassica family, though all flavour has been carefully boiled out of it until it resembles a grey sponge. Do not add salt. Salt is a *declaration*. Salt suggests that the food was missing something, which implies that perfection is not already achieved. Perfection is the absence of anything worth noting.

You feed the child. It opens its mouth mechanically, accepting the paste with the same expression it would offer a tax form. Good. You are raising a citizen.

Now, the evening.

The sun has set, which is merciful. The artificial light in the home is a flickering bulb, shade 3C, “Fluorescent Remorse.” It casts shadows that are neither sharp nor soft, just present, like a distant relative at a funeral who refuses to speak. You sit in your designated chair. The child is in its crib, staring at the ceiling, which is textured to

resemble dried oatmeal.

You feel it again. That flicker.

A memory of something warm. A taste of something *other* than paste. A thought that maybe, just maybe, the blade of grass was not a breach but a possibility. You feel your lips begin to curve, the muscle memory of a smile, left over from a time you do not remember and cannot afford to recall.

You stop it.

Place your palm flat against your own mouth now, the way you did with the child this morning. Press firmly. Breathe slowly through your nose. The urge subsides. Your face settles into its proper configuration: neutral, functional, a slate wiped clean of any inscription.

Check the child. It is asleep. Its face, too, is slack and expressionless. No dreams are visible, because dreams are private—and in this world, privacy is the only safe place for joy. Let the child's heart skip in the darkness of its own skull. Let the child's soul glimmer behind closed eyelids. The outside world will never know.

And that is the true comfort.

There is a strange, quiet peace in knowing that every face you pass on the street is holding the same stillness. No one is laughing at a joke you did not hear. No one is glowing from a sunrise you missed. Everyone is equally, perfectly, beautifully empty. The system is not a cage. It is a blanket. It is a warm, grey, slightly damp blanket that covers the whole city, muffling the sharp edges of feeling.

You are not alone in your suppression. You are part of a congregation. A choir of closed mouths. A sea of still hands.

Your heart may skip. That is allowed—internally. The body has its secret rebellions. But the face, the face must remain immobile. That is the covenant.

So sit, now, in the dim light. Listen to the hum of the refrigerator—

a steady, grey sound. Feel the weight of your child, dampened and safe. The world outside is a carefully maintained vacuum, and you have done your small part to keep it empty.

It is good.

It is enough.

It is, in its own way, a kind of happiness—as long as no one ever, ever says so out loud.

A Chromatic Arpeggio for a Marooned Cyclist

> *While pedaling across the featureless Plains of Porridge, nineteen-year-old Auri's bicycle chain snaps, leaving her stranded in a downpour to witness a sky-splitting double rainbow.*

A Chromatic Arpeggio for a Marooned Cyclist

The chain snapped like a dry wishbone. Auri felt it through the pedals first—that sudden useless dropping, the way her legs kept pumping into nothing—and then the bicycle slewed sideways on the gravel shoulder like a dying fish.

She planted a foot down and stood there, straddling the frame, watching the rain-darkened road steam in the late afternoon heat. The Plains of Porridge stretched around her in every direction, a vast beige undulation of boiled-grain fields that looked exactly like what they were: miles and miles of someone having gone very hard in the direction of making absolutely nothing happen. The sky was the color of a dirty sock someone had been saving for a special occasion.

"Perfect," she said, and her voice fell flat into the stillness, swallowed by the wet air.

She knelt, examined the chain. It lay in a sad little heap on the grimy derailleur, one link split clean open, the metal edges glaring at her like a tiny, smug mouth. She didn't have a repair kit. She never had a repair kit. What she had was a half-eaten block of boiled millet wrapped in grey wax paper and the growing certainty

that she would die here, picked clean by whatever passed for scavengers in this part of the world—probably beige vultures with beige opinions.

The first drop hit her forehead like a cold little accusation.

She looked up. The clouds had been gathering all afternoon, lumpen and gray, but she'd ignored them because ignoring things was the regional sport. Now they were close enough to touch, bellies full and sagging, and the air had gone thin and tight, the kind of pressure that sat on your chest like a sleeping animal.

The rain started all at once, not gradually, not politely, but with the abrupt certainty of a bureaucrat who has run out of patience. It hammered the fields. It hammered the road. It hammered Auri's head with the kind of impersonal violence that made her feel less like a person and more like something that had made the mistake of being outside. She dragged the bicycle to the shoulder, sat on the damp grass with her back to the wind, and waited.

The storm was beautiful, and that was the problem.

She watched it roll across the plains in great grey curtains, watched the light go strange and greenish at the edges, watched the rain sweep over the grain fields in waves like a giant shaking out a wet tablecloth. The thunder came not as a crack but as a long, rolling groan, like the earth itself had eaten something that disagreed with it. And then the sun, still low in the west, found a gap in the clouds.

It happened the way these things always happen: suddenly, and then all at once, and then in a way that made you feel like a fool for not having seen it coming.

The light broke through. And the light came apart.

Auri saw it happen—watched the white sunlight split into bands, into layers, into a great, staggering arch of color that vaulted across the sky like someone had thrown open a door to a room that was not supposed to exist. Violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, red—each one so sharp and pure it hurt to look at, and then above it a second arc, fainter, stranger, the colors reversed, the whole

thing doubled and impossible.

Her mouth fell open.

The rainbow hung there like a secret that had forgotten to stay hidden, like a bruise of light, like a wound in the grey fabric of the world through which something wild was spilling. The colors were obscene. They were too much. They were the kind of thing that happened in old stories, the kind of thing people whispered about in the dark, the kind of thing that got you a visit from men and women with clipboards and gentle voices and questions about your emotional regulation protocols.

Auri's chest tightened. Something was rising in her, something hot and fizzy, something that wanted to come out as a laugh or a gasp or a sob—she didn't know which, and that was worse. It scrambled up her throat like a rat climbing a curtain. Her face tried to change. Her lips wanted to curl. Her eyes wanted to widen.

She clamped down.

It was like trying to hold a door shut against a hurricane. She pressed her lips together until they went white. She stared at the rabbit-gnawed grass at her feet. She counted backwards from a hundred in her head, then forwards, then backwards again, the numbers becoming a grey static that she could hide behind. She thought about boiled millet. She thought about the texture of wet wool. She thought about the precise, lifeless shade of her own grey trousers.

The rainbow was still there. She could feel it, even with her eyes fixed on the ground—a pressure on the back of her skull, a warmth on her skin. It was patient. It was waiting.

In the village behind her, she knew, the shutters were closed. The triple-layered curtains were drawn. The sound-proofing foam was wedged into the window frames, and the families huddled in their windowless rooms with their bland food and their beige clothes, waiting for the sensory violence of the storm to pass, waiting for the sky to go back to its normal, decent, non-accusatory grey. They would never see it. They would deny, if asked, that it had ever

happened.

But Auri had seen it. The image was already burning itself into the soft tissue behind her eyes, a brand in violet and neon lime.

She kept her face flat and her hands still and her breathing steady, and inside her chest, the thing that wanted to scream with joy beat against its cage like a trapped bird.

Auri's jaw ached. She'd been clenching it so hard her molars felt like they were trying to fuse into a single grey tooth. The pressure behind her eyes was a living thing now, a second heartbeat pulsing in violet and green. She kept her gaze fixed on the wet grass, on a particular blade that had been bent by the rain into a shape that reminded her of a question mark, and she counted.

One hundred and seven. One hundred and eight. One hundred and nine.

A giggle tried to escape. It came up from her diaphragm like a bubble from deep water, and she caught it at the back of her throat with a sound that came out as a cough, then a choke, then a strange little grunt that could have meant anything. She converted it into a throat-clearing, the way you convert a scream into a sneeze, and earned herself a brief, hollow satisfaction.

Her hands were trembling. She pressed them flat against the wet gravel, feeling the sharp edges dig into her palms, grounding herself in the small, reliable pain. The cold helped. The damp seeping through her trousers helped. The thought that someone might be watching from one of the distant farmhouses—even through the triple-layered curtains—helped in the way a bucket of ice water helps a drowning man stay focused.

She thought about the texture of wet wool. She thought about the exact consistency of boiled turnip. She thought about the face of the local mental health social worker, a woman named Grettle with eyebrows that looked like two dead caterpillars having a disagreement, and the way Grettle would smile with her mouth but not her eyes as she asked, "And how did that *color* make you feel, Auri?"

A spasm rippled through her cheek. She pressed her lips together so hard they went white, then blue, then a shade of grey that was almost acceptable.

A sound escaped her. It was small—a single, strangled note, like a mouse that had been stepped on politely. The wind carried it away before it could reach any ears but her own, but she felt it leave her body like a betrayal. She swallowed the rest. She swallowed the whole expanding universe of joy that was trying to unfold in her chest, compressed it down into a dense, hot little ball, and lodged it behind her breastbone where it pulsed like a second, naughtier heart.

The rain stopped. The clouds began to tear apart, revealing patches of a sky so pale it was almost blue, but not quite—the grey returning like a habit, like an old friend who didn't know when to leave. The rainbow, denied its stage, began to fade. First the outer arc dissolved, then the inner, the colors bleeding into one another and then into nothing, until all that remained was a smear of light on the horizon that looked like a distant city on fire.

Auri let out a long, slow breath. Her jaw unlocked itself with an audible click. She unclenched her hands, one finger at a time, and watched the blood rush back into the pale crescents her nails had carved.

She was alone. She had won. The rainbow was gone, and she was still here, still grey, still safe, still flat as a board, flat as a pancake, flat as the whole featureless Plains of Porridge with their endless, undemanding nothing.

But inside her chest, the compressed ball of joy pulsed once, twice, and then settled into a low, steady hum. It was not going anywhere. It was only waiting for the next time she was alone, the next time she could let it out to unfurl and breathe and be.

She stood up, brushed the gravel from her trousers, and looked down the empty road.

The sound came first—a low, grinding rumble that grew into a

cough, then a roar, then the kind of shuddering mechanical complaint that made Auri think of a dying animal having strong opinions about its own death.

A dust-hauler was approaching from the south, a great grey beast of a vehicle with a cab the color of old dishwater and a bed piled high with what appeared to be several tons of beige sediment. The dust-hauler industry was built on the principle that dirt, unlike emotions, was acceptable to move around in public. The truck shuddered to a halt a few yards past her, its brakes squealing like a startled pig. The engine idled with a sound like someone clearing phlegm for a full ten seconds before cutting out.

The door opened.

A man climbed down. He was built like a filing cabinet—square, grey, functional, with a face that looked like someone had drawn it with a blunt pencil on a rainy Tuesday. His clothes were a shade of grey that Auri could only describe as "bureaucrat-at-funeral" and his expression was the kind of flat that made pancakes look like avant-garde sculpture.

He walked over to her bicycle, knelt, examined the broken chain with the clinical detachment of a doctor examining a patient who had already died, looked up at her, and said, "Chain's broke."

Auri nodded. She kept her face perfectly still, a smooth grey wall behind which a kaleidoscope was still echoing. "Yes," she said. Her voice came out flat, drained of color, the verbal equivalent of a boiled potato. She was proud of that.

The driver stood up, wiped his hands on his trousers, and gestured toward the truck. "Got tools. Could fix it, but it'd be a patch job. You'd want a new chain soon." He said this the way someone might announce that water is wet, or that rain is damp, or that the sky is the color of a dirty sock—with the weary certainty of someone who had never been surprised by anything in his entire life.

Auri considered her options. She could accept his help, stay flat, stay grey, stay safe. She could refuse, continue to sit on the wet grass with her broken bicycle and her blooming interior universe,

risk another hour of exposure to the empty sky. She could—

"Thank you," she said. Flat. Controlled. Perfect.

The driver nodded, walked back to his truck, and returned with a toolbox that looked like a grey brick with handles. He knelt beside the bicycle, removed the broken chain with the practiced efficiency of someone who had done this a thousand times, and began to work. The rain had stopped completely now, and the clouds were retreating in ragged strips, revealing a sky the color of a bandage that had been left on too long.

Auri watched him work. She did not smile. She did not allow her eyes to brighten. She held her face like a closed book, like a locked door, like a room with the curtains drawn. But inside her chest, the compressed ball of joy pulsed—once, twice—and began to thrum with a quiet, steady warmth.

She thought about the rainbow. The double arc. The violet and neon lime that had burned through the grey like a scream of pure, reckless beauty. It was still there, behind her eyes, a stain on the canvas of her memory that no amount of beige could cover. She could feel it like a secret bone, like a third lung, like a second heart beating in a rhythm no one else could hear.

The driver fitted the new links, tested the repair, stood up. "That'll hold. Get it replaced proper, soon."

"Thank you," Auri said again. The words came out clean, empty, professionally neutral. She could feel the driver's eyes on her—not suspicious, not curious, simply registering the presence of another grey-faced human going about a grey-faced business on a grey-faced day. He was satisfied. She had passed.

He nodded once, closed the toolbox, climbed back into his truck. The engine coughed to life, rattled, settled into its rhythmic complaint. The driver looked out at her through the window, his face an unreadable slate, and said something that was probably "goodbye" but was lost in the mechanical roar.

The truck pulled away. The dust it kicked up settled slowly, a beige

curtain falling back into place.

Auri stood alone on the empty road, her bicycle repaired, her face flat, her hands steady.

The rainbow burned behind her eyes like a secret flame.

She mounted the bicycle, felt the chain catch, and began to pedal north toward the village with its sound-proofed shutters and its triple-layered curtains and its people who had hidden from the storm and would never know what they had missed. The road stretched ahead like a long, wet bandage, and Auri rode down the middle of it, her face blank, her heart a riot of color, carrying her private defiance home like a stolen jewel wrapped in grey cloth.

Glumrock’s Garden of Illegal Chlorophyll

> *A retired wall-painter named Glumrock discovers a stubborn, vibrant green weed growing in the cracks of the Pavement Square and decides to nurse it instead of reporting the 'chromatic eyesore.'*

Glumrock’s Garden of Illegal Chlorophyll

Glumrock spent his mornings the way he’d spent his working life: studying grey. He’d lean against the railing of his balcony—a stubby iron thing painted in three shades of ‘Fog’—and catalogue the sky. Today it was a flat, unambitious pewter, the kind that didn’t promise rain or shine but simply existed, like a sigh in fabric form. Below, the street was slick with yesterday’s drizzle, the pavement a seamless slab of ‘Wet Stone.’ He nodded approvingly. Perfectly bland. A day for boiled endive and a nap.

He was seventy-three, retired from a career painting the walls of municipal buildings. His specialty had been ‘Uniform Grey No. 4,’ a shade so neutral it practically apologized for being visible. He’d been good at it. Boring, thorough, and good. His pension was a modest allowance of boiled grains and a small room above a dry cleaner that smelled of starch and resignation. He liked it. He liked the predictability of everything, the way the world never startled him.

That morning, he decided to take his constitutional to Pavement Square. The square was a wide, flat expanse of concrete, popular for its total absence of benches, trees, or any feature that might encourage lingering. Citizens passed through it with the grim

efficiency of water draining from a sink. Glumrock shuffled along the edge, his charcoal overcoat dragging slightly, his eyes scanning the ground for cracks. He had a hobby of counting them, a pastime he'd never mentioned to anyone because it felt almost… enjoyable.

He was at crack number 1,247 when he saw it.

It was the color of a lie that hadn't yet been caught. A small, insistent sprig of green—emerald, malachite, a kind of chlorophyll riot that didn't belong in this world of gentle greys. It had pushed through a hairline fracture in the concrete like a finger through a dam. The color was so aggressive it almost seemed to hum. Glumrock's breath hitched. He felt a cold sweat bloom under his collar, a sensation he associated with the time he'd accidentally smiled at a funeral.

His first thought was to stamp it out. Grind it into the pavement with his heel. Report it to the Pavement Sanitation Committee as a chromatic eyesore. That was the proper response. That was *safe*.

His hand reached into his pocket and found the handkerchief his mother had given him, a square of dove-grey linen that had never once touched a color. He pulled it out, intending to cover the weed, to smother it before anyone saw. But as he knelt, the sun broke through a cloud—a rare, sharp shaft of light—and struck the plant so that it glowed, translucent and obscene.

Glumrock froze.

He had not eaten anything with flavor in forty years. He had not worn a shirt that wasn't grey in sixty. He had not felt a single thing that could be called "delight" since he was a child and found a lost button that was, of all things, *red*. He'd buried that button in a matchbox under his bed and never spoken of it. The memory of its glossy surface still made his stomach clench.

He looked around. The square was empty save for a woman in a beige coat hurrying toward the bus stop. No one was watching.

Instead of crushing the weed, he unbuttoned his overcoat. It was a heavy garment, charcoal wool, as wide as a tent. He draped it over

the crack, creating a small, grey tent over the plant. Then he sat down on the edge of the pavement, his back to the overcoat, like an old man resting after a long walk. He cleared his throat.

“You’re a menace,” he whispered, low and guttural, as if scolding a cat. “A disgusting little splash of life. You think you’re special? You’re just a weed. A *weed*, you hear me? You probably taste like regret and rust.”

He felt the heat of an unnameable emotion building behind his ribs.

“I’m only doing this so no one reports you,” he muttered, “and I don’t have to deal with the paperwork. Don’t get ideas. Don’t grow. You’ll die anyway. Everything dies in this town.”

A gentle breeze lifted the edge of the overcoat, and he caught another flash of that shocking green. He pushed the coat back down with a trembling hand.

“But,” he added, quieter now, “if you *do* grow… try to stay small, you ridiculous little piece of sunshine. I can’t protect you forever.”

He sat there for the rest of the morning, pretending to rest, while the weed breathed its illegal chlorophyll into the grey air. And for the first time in decades, Glumrock felt a crack in his own pavement —a tiny, terrifying, wonderful fissure, through which something green might one day push.

The days that followed became a quiet liturgy of lies. Glumrock would wake at dawn, slip into his overcoat, and shuffle to Pavement Square with the determined blankness of a man on a mission from the Boiled Grain Council. He’d sit on the same spot, arrange his coat the same way, and whisper the same insults to the green thing that had taken root in his chest as firmly as it had in the concrete.

“Still alive, you little pest? Tragic. Absolutely tragic. Your color is an offense against decency. You should be ashamed.”

The weed, for its part, seemed unbothered. It grew. Each morning it was taller, thicker, more obscenely verdant. The stem developed a

fuzz of tiny hairs that caught the light like minute, treasonous fibers. Glumrock found himself staring at it for hours, cataloguing its greens the way he used to catalogue greys, but with a hunger he couldn't name. There was a shade in the center of the leaves—almost yellow, like the memory of a lemon someone had described to him once—that made his mouth water.

He brought it water. In a tin cup, stolen from the communal kitchen. He'd pretend to drink, then tip the cup under the coat, letting the liquid soak into the crack. The plant drank greedily. He could almost hear it sigh.

On the seventh day, Glumrock arrived to find the weed had done something unprecedented. It had grown a bud. A tight, closed fist of something about to happen, wrapped in a sheath of pale green that looked almost translucent in the morning light. The bud was the size of his thumbnail, and it pointed upward like an accusation.

Glumrock's heart performed a strange gymnastics in his ribcage. He sat down heavily, his knees cracking like dry twigs.

"No," he whispered. "No, no, no. You don't get to do that. You're a weed. Weeds don't flower. Weeds just… exist. Ugly. Grey-adjacent."

But the bud didn't care about his expectations. Over the next three days, it swelled. It grew fat and arrogant, the sheath splitting to reveal a hint of something inside—a color so bright it seemed to burn. Glumrock stopped sleeping. He'd lie in bed staring at the ceiling, imagining the moment of bloom, dreading it, wanting it with a desperation that felt like illness.

On the tenth day, it happened.

He arrived at dawn to find the bud had opened. The flower was a star-shaped explosion of yellow—not a muted, apologetic yellow, but a screaming, defiant, *canary* yellow, the kind of yellow that would make a lemon blush. The petals were thin and delicate, veined with a deeper gold, and they trembled in the breeze like something alive and terrified of its own beauty. Around the center, a cluster of tiny orange stamens held up their heads like a chorus of miniature suns.

Glumrock forgot to breathe.

He sat there, mouth slightly open, tears—actual, wet tears—running down his face. He hadn't cried since he was six years old and his mother had taken away a particularly nice grey pebble he'd found. He didn't know the machinery for tears still worked. They tasted like salt and something else, something that might have been joy if he'd had a name for it.

"You're going to get us both killed," he whispered, his voice cracking.

A shadow fell over him.

He looked up. A man in a beige coat was standing three feet away, staring at the flower with an expression of profound, almost religious horror. His face was the color of old porridge, and his mouth hung open, forming a small, dark O.

"Is that… *yellow*?" the man asked, his voice barely a whisper.

Glumrock's mind went blank. Then it flooded with terror. He looked around. The square wasn't empty. A woman in grey had stopped, her shopping bag dangling from her hand. A bus driver had leaned out of his window, his eyes wide. Three more people had gathered at the edge of the square, drawn by the unspoken gravity of disaster.

"No," Glumrock said, his voice too loud. "No, it's not. It's… ochre. A very subdued ochre. Almost brown. Very boring."

"It's *blooming*," the man said, taking a step back. "I saw it. The color. It went right into my eyes like a needle."

"You're imagining things," Glumrock said. He could feel the flower behind him, a burning presence. He could smell it now—a sweet, cloying scent that didn't belong in this world of boiled endive and wet stone. It smelled like something illegal. Like a childhood he'd never been allowed to have.

"I'm calling the Social Workers," the woman with the shopping bag said, already pulling out a rectangular device. "This is a clear case

of joy-inducing vegetation. It's a health hazard."

Glumrock's hand moved before his brain caught up.

He turned, dropped to his knees, and grabbed the flower at its base. The stem was rough against his palm, alive and stubborn. He didn't hesitate. He yanked, and the plant came free from the crack with a soft, wet sound, roots trailing dirt. The yellow flower bobbed in his grip, still bright, still obscene.

The crowd gasped.

He opened his mouth wide. He didn't know where the instinct came from—some deep, primal place that had never been fully bleached by the grey. He shoved the entire flower into his mouth. Petals, stamens, stem, roots. Dirt and all. And he bit down.

The taste hit him like a shock to the nervous system.

It was sharp, acrid, and sweet all at once. The petals dissolved on his tongue like sunbeams made solid. The stem was fibrous and bitter, the roots gritty with soil. There was a moment of overwhelming, dizzying *flavor*—the first flavor he'd tasted in forty years—and then it was gone, swallowed down his throat in a single, desperate gulp.

He sat back, panting, tears still wet on his face. The crowd stared at him, frozen. The man in beige had gone pale. The woman with the shopping bag had lowered her device.

Glumrock licked his lips. He could still taste it. A ghost of yellow, lingering at the back of his tongue. He ran his tongue over his teeth and felt something rough. A petal stuck to his canine. He sucked it off and swallowed again.

"There," he said, his voice hoarse. "No flower. No problem. Just an old man eating a mouthful of concrete dust. Very normal. Very boring. Carry on."

The crowd didn't move. Glumrock stood up, brushing dirt from his knees, and shuffled away from the crack. He didn't look back. He walked across the square, through the cluster of onlookers, past the

bus, and down the street toward his apartment above the dry cleaner. His legs felt weak. His hands were shaking. And somewhere in his chest, a small, fierce creature was flapping its wings against his ribs, desperate to escape.

He made it to his door and fumbled with the key. Inside, he locked the door and leaned against it, sliding down until he was sitting on the floor. The room was dark and grey and smelled of starch and resignation. But his mouth tasted like sunlight. His teeth were stained yellow, a permanent, damning evidence of what he'd done.

He touched his tongue to the stain and felt the ghost of petals.

The bird in his chest beat its wings once, twice, and then settled into a steady, painful rhythm. A heartbeat with feathers.

He didn't know what he'd done. He didn't know if he'd saved himself or damned himself. But as he sat there in the grey dark, he felt something he hadn't felt since he'd found that red button as a child, something that made the fear almost worth it.

He felt *full*.

A Note from the Founder

Anthologist.ai was founded in April 2026 with a simple mission: to bring back pulp fiction.

There used to be a rich, diverse world of short fiction—magazines on every newsstand, stories for every taste, new voices every month. That world quietly disappeared. We're here to fill that gap.

We're not interested in selling you anything. Anthologist exists for one reason only: to deliver free, regular short fiction directly to readers—the way it used to be.

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— Tom, Founder of Anthologist.ai